

## Teach For America: Myth vs. Reality

### 1) Teach For America's mission and purpose

**Myth:** Teach For America is addressing our nation's teacher shortage by recruiting inexperienced recent college graduates to teach in shortage areas, like math and science.

**Reality:** Teach For America's explicit purpose is to close the achievement gap between students from low-income backgrounds and their more affluent peers. To do this, TFA recruits some of the best and brightest talent in our nation to commit to teach for two years or more in urban and rural low-income communities, and to become life-long leaders for educational equity. While in the classroom, TFA corps members (a) work to shatter the prevailing ideology that students of color or from low-income backgrounds can't learn, (b) add much needed capacity to under-resourced systems, and (c) change the life paths of their students by achieving measurable and significant academic gains. Over time, TFA alumni work as leaders in the classroom, at the school and district level, and across all sectors to (a) minimize the extra challenges that children growing up in low-income communities face, (b) build the capacity of schools and school systems, and (c) change the prevailing ideology through their examples and their advocacy.

### 2) Recruitment and selection at Teach For America

**Myth:** Teach For America is an elitist organization that recruits only privileged Ivy League students, who are not prepared to work with diverse student populations and who simply see TFA as a resume builder.

**Reality:** Teach For America's recruitment and selection process identifies leaders who will be effective teachers in the classroom and who will become life-long leaders for educational equity. We actively recruit at over 450 colleges and universities across the country. Our most represented alma maters in the 2008 corps are the University of Michigan, the University of Illinois, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Georgia, and the University of Texas at Austin. The alma maters that are most heavily represented in the current Teach For America – Connecticut corps, in decreasing order, include the University of Connecticut, College of the Holy Cross, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the University of Wisconsin, Wesleyan University, the University of Washington, the University of North Carolina, Brown University, and Northwestern University. Our organization invests considerable time and resources recruiting from dozens of schools throughout CT.

Moreover, Teach for America is deeply committed to recruiting a diverse corps of teachers and staff. We believe our ability to succeed in achieving our mission is fundamentally dependent on the diversity of our organization at every level. Among our 2008 corps members, 29 percent are people of color, compared with 24 percent of our nation's college seniors. Moreover, the percentage of our corps members who are African-American is *double* that of the graduating seniors at our nation's top 450 colleges and universities. We invest heavily in the recruitment of corps members of color, and partner with major professional and campus organizations across the country to recruit more diverse candidates. This year alone, 25 percent of the graduating class at Spelman University applied to Teach For America.

**Myth:** Teach For America's selection process focuses only on GPA and on other indicators that don't have anything to do with a candidate's ability to teach.

**Reality:** We have spent much of the last decade studying the characteristics of our most effective teachers in order to continuously improve our selection and training model. The result is a rigorous, data-driven process to the selection and training of our corps members, informed by years of results in the classroom. The selection traits we look for in candidates include respect and humility for students and families in low-income communities, commitment to TFA's mission and the belief that all children can learn, demonstrated past achievement, perseverance in the face of challenges, strong critical thinking skills, the ability to influence and motivate others, organizational skills, professionalism and integrity. We recognize that effective teachers and leaders come in many forms with varied past experiences, so there is no one profile of a typical Teach For America corps member. In a typical year, approximately 15-20% of candidates who apply to Teach For America meet selection criteria and are accepted to the program.

### 3) Teach For America training and preparation

**Myth:** Teach For America corps members lack adequate preparation, with only a few weeks of training over the summer.

**Reality:** Teach For America's unique selection model and preparation program enables teachers to be effective on day one in the classroom and helps to continually increase their effectiveness throughout their time in the corps. Corps members engage in an intense training continuum over the summer, which includes several weeks of student teaching and is structured through a curriculum that has been informed and continuously improved by years of research and student achievement data. Our summer training institute is just one part of a comprehensive, two-year program of professional development. From the moment we select individuals to participate in our program, we work relentlessly to ensure that they have the knowledge, skills, and mind-sets to teach successfully in under-resourced schools.

Based on feedback from principals and data about our teachers' impact on student achievement, it is clear that our model of teacher preparation and support is one approach that works. Nearly all of our teachers' principals report that the training our corps members received is at least as good or is better than the training of other beginning teachers. The majority of our principals rate Teach For America corps members' training as better than that of other beginning teachers. Moreover, our model of ongoing professional development and support ensures that our teachers are being supervised and supported for two full years by highly trained program directors who are working with them systematically to set clear goals, evaluate progress against those goals, and continuously reflect on what they can do to improve and have the most significant impact.

### 4) Teach For America's impact on student achievement

**Myth:** Teach For America corps members are too inexperienced to be effective in the classroom, and the results of research on Teach For America's impact in the classroom are either negative or mixed.

**Reality:** Despite their inexperience, the research demonstrates that our corps members are highly effective at measurably improving student achievement in our nation's most challenging classrooms and schools. A growing and rigorous body of research speaks to the efficacy of Teach For America corps members. Most critics of Teach For America selectively cite studies that do not meet the same methodological standard.

- Urban Institute, 2008: A longitudinal study released in 2008 by The Urban Institute's Center for the Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research in 2008 found that high school students taught by Teach For America teachers excelled compared to their peers. In fact, the study found that Teach For America corps members have a positive effect on student achievement relative to other teachers, including those who are fully certified in their subject areas. The incremental impact of having a Teach For America teacher was three times that of having a teacher with three or more years of experience.
- Mathematica, 2004: The most rigorous study on Teach For America's impact on student achievement was released in 2004 by leading research firm Mathematica. Using a methodology widely regarded as the gold standard, researchers randomly assigned students to the classrooms of corps members and of other new and veteran teachers in the same grade levels and schools, and then gave students a norm-referenced test at the beginning and end of the year. The study found that students of Teach For America corps members:
  - Make more progress in both reading and math in a year than would typically be expected.
  - Attain significantly greater gains in math than students of other teachers, even certified teachers and veteran teachers.
  - The study also confirmed that corps members are working in the highest-need classrooms in the country, with students beginning the year on average at the 14th percentile against the national norm.

In a research report card by the journal *Education Next*, this study's methodology received an A. The full study can be found online: [www.teachforamerica.org/research/studies\\_student\\_outcomes.htm](http://www.teachforamerica.org/research/studies_student_outcomes.htm).

- Louisiana Value-Added Teacher Preparation Study (2007): A multi-year statewide study of teacher preparation programs in Louisiana found that teachers who participate in the Louisiana Practitioner Teacher Project—most of whom are Teach For America corps members—are having a significant impact on student achievement. The study recognized the LPTP as a “Level 1” program, which is defined as a program with

evidence that “new teachers prepared by the program are more effective than experienced teachers (as well as other new teachers) in increasing student achievement”—a rating that far surpasses what the authors define as reasonable expectations for programs preparing new teachers. The model of Louisiana’s Practitioner Teacher Program is similar in timeline and structure to the Resident Teacher Certificate being proposed in Connecticut today. You can read more about the study online: [www.regents.state.la.us/pdfs/PubAff/2007/teacher10-25-07.pdf](http://www.regents.state.la.us/pdfs/PubAff/2007/teacher10-25-07.pdf)

- NYC Studies, 2006 and 2007: Two research teams (Kane, Rockoff, Staiger; and the Teacher Pathways Project), each representing a collaboration among several major research universities, reviewed several years’ worth of student achievement data for all new teachers in New York City to compare traditionally certified teachers with groups of alternatively certified teachers, including Teach For America corps members. These studies, while not using random-assignment designs, included all the standard controls of a non-experimental design to attempt to isolate the value added by the teachers. Kane, Rockoff, Staiger (2006) found that TFA teachers are more effective than their traditionally certified counterparts in terms of impact on student achievement in math, and just as effective in reading/language arts. The Teacher Pathways Project (2006) found that Teach For America corps members are as effective as, or more effective than, their certified counterparts in math (depending on grade level). The study also indicated that although TFA corps members are not initially as effective as traditionally certified teachers in English/language arts, they are as effective by year two.

Among all the groups studied in both projects, Teach For America teachers were found to be working with the highest concentration of students who fall below the poverty line. 92 percent of our teachers’ students fell into that category, compared with 76 percent of students taught by traditionally certified teachers.

A report from authors involved in both studies, published in 2007 by the Urban Institute/CALDER, cites the influx of teachers with strong academic backgrounds recruited through Teach For America and NYC Teaching Fellows as a significant factor in student achievement gains that were most substantial in the city’s highest-poverty schools. Specifically, 40 percent of all new teachers hired during this period of significant academic improvement were TFA corps members or NYC Teaching Fellows candidates.

Studies cited by Teach For America critics have less rigorous methodologies. For example:

- A 2002 study by David Berliner and Ildiko Laczko-Kerr of Arizona State University suffered from several methodological flaws, most importantly examining student achievement levels at year-end without controlling for students’ prior achievement levels. In addition, there were fundamental problems in the way teachers were “matched” with non-Teach For America teachers that made the comparisons between teachers’ effectiveness less valid. No unbiased researcher would grant this study the same research value as the study conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, which controlled for as many variables as possible at the student, classroom, and school levels by randomly assigning students to classrooms taught by Teach For America corps members and other teachers in the same grade level and schools. In a research report card by the journal *Education Next*, this study’s methodology received a D.
- A 2005 study by Linda Darling-Hammond, Deborah J. Holtzman, Su Jin Gatlin, and Julian Vasquez Heilig of Stanford University was widely released without going through an independent peer-review process, which likely would have brought attention to a number of flaws, including inadequate sample sizes, a conflation of the effects of teacher experience and teacher certification, and failure to control for school quality. In the *Education Next* report card, this study’s methodology received a C.
  - Sample sizes for each analysis are not reported, though in some cases they appear to be as small as two or three Teach For America corps members, and the study often makes assertions about the lesser effectiveness of TFA teachers based on these small samples.
  - The study seems to misinterpret the effect of teacher experience as the effect of certification. In controlling for teacher experience, the study’s statistical model ignores the common understanding that teacher effectiveness does not increase in a linear way with experience—rather, it increases steeply in the first couple of years and then begins to level out. At the same time, the analysis does not recognize the fact that in Houston, where the study was conducted, more than 95 percent of our first-year corps members are not fully certified, and more than 90 percent of our second-year teachers are. The study’s conclusion that certified teachers (including Teach For America teachers who are certified) are more

effective than uncertified teachers is thus really an indication that more experienced teachers are more effective than less experienced ones.

- Unlike Mathematica and other rigorous studies, the Darling-Hammond study does not use teachers within the same schools as the comparison group when looking at the effectiveness of Teach For America teachers. In this kind of study, it is crucial to ensure that any differences in impact are not attributable to nonrandom differences between schools. Failure to control for school placement is a design flaw that effectively punishes any studied group that chooses to serve low-performing schools.

##### 5) Teach For America retention

**Myth:** By only requiring a two-year commitment, Teach For America adds to churn in underserved schools, and deprofessionalizes teaching as a career.

**Reality:** Teach For America places corps in schools where principals choose to hire them after considering both their potential impact and their two-year commitment. Teach For America's retention rate for corps members within their two-year commitment is actually higher than the rate for new teachers overall and the rate for all new teachers in low-income communities—as estimated in a widely disseminated 2003 report by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. According to the NCTAF, 83 percent of new teachers in high-poverty schools remain in the profession for a second year; in comparison, 90 percent of the 2007 Teach For America corps are fulfilling their two-year commitment.

Moreover, Teach For America teachers stay in the profession at a much higher rate than is commonly assumed. According to a study by Harvard's Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, the majority of Teach For America corps members stay in the classroom beyond the two-year commitment. The percentage of Teach For America teachers who keep teaching for a third year actually exceeds that of other new teachers in high-poverty schools who remain for a third year. In addition, the majority of alumni remain in the field of education long-term. Two-thirds (67 percent) of Teach For America alumni are working or studying full-time in the field of education. Of this group, half are teaching—with the majority teaching in low-income communities—even though less than 10 percent had been considering a career in education when they entered the corps.

Finally, we do not believe it is in our state or our nation's best interest for all of Teach For America's alumni to remain in the field of education. We believe our best hope for ending educational inequity lies in enlisting our country's most promising future leaders to fight this injustice. It is critical that many of these recruits remain in the field of education to provide long-term, sustained leadership from within. But we will not solve the problem from within schools alone, however, so it is equally critical that some of these recruits, armed with the insight that comes from working in disadvantaged schools, lead the charge for reform from other sectors, including policy and business.

Teach For America has built an ever-expanding pipeline of leaders who are working for fundamental change. Our alumni are working as lead teachers, principals, superintendents, nonprofit leaders, school board members, and social entrepreneurs in high-need communities across the country. While still in their 20s and 30s, they are providing significant leadership: pioneering education reform initiatives, working from other sectors to marshal necessary resources and change policies, winning the highest accolades teachers can win, and running many of the high-performing schools in low-income communities. The vast majority of our alumni, regardless of career path, remain committed to our mission of ensuring educational equity well beyond their corps commitments. In fact, 93 percent are supporting Teach For America's mission through career, philanthropy, volunteer work, or graduate study.

We are inspired by evidence of the increasing impact our alumni are having in communities across the country, from New Orleans to Newark to Oakland. In Washington DC, schools chancellor Michelle Rhee (Baltimore Corps '92) has built a senior team that includes fellow alumni such as deputy chancellor Kaya Henderson (New York City Corps '92) and Jason Kamras (Metro D.C. Corps '96), the city's first National Teacher of the Year. Abigail Smith (Eastern North Carolina Corps '92) serves as an education policy adviser to the city's mayor. Sekou Biddle (New York City Corps '93) is one of five elected state school board members. More than 10 percent of the city's schools are now run by Teach For America alumni. Each of these alumni participated in Teach For America when we were investing less than we are today in their training and development, so we have high expectations for the impact alumni will have as we continue to enhance our training, development and support.